

# Helping Grassroots Preservationists Emerge in the Field

In 1986, after 30 years of teaching state history in the public schools, Willie Lee Gay retired and began working to preserve historic places in her hometown of Houston, Texas. She took a particular interest in saving a Victorian mansion built by Benjamin Covington, a prominent African-American doctor. "It was where people like (opera singers) Paul Robeson and Marion Anderson would stay when they visited Houston, since they couldn't stay in hotels," Gay said. "It was truly a historic home. A church wanted to move it to put in a parking lot, but we couldn't get the money raised, so it was just torn down."

Then Gay went to the 1992 National Preservation Conference in Miami, Fla., with assistance from the Emerging Preservation Leaders Scholarship Program. It was the first year the National Trust for Historic Preservation had made a comprehensive effort to include minorities in the conference. "It was one of the most enlivening, enriching experiences I've ever had," Gay said. "Before going, I only knew of local resources for preservation. If I'd known of the different avenues of approaching fund-raising, the foundations and such that I learned about in Miami, I'm sure we could've preserved the Covington House."

One piece of black history is lost, but since that Miami conference, many more pieces of African-, Asian-, Hispanic-, Native and rural American history have likely been spared the wrecking ball, thanks to a better representation of America coming together each year at the conference. In the seven years since its inception, the Emerging Preservation Leaders Program has helped to bring more than 649 preservationists from 47 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

The issue of including minorities in the historic preservation movement goes back much further than the early nineties. Carl Westmoreland of Ohio drew attention towards it with an inspiring address about community preservation at the 1971 National Preservation Conference. In 1988,

a \$5,000 grant by the Louise Semple Taft Foundation brought community leaders to the Cincinnati conference, and there was an educational track on cultural diversity at the Charleston, SC., conference in 1990. The final thrust was the 1991 conference, held in one of America's most diverse cities, San Francisco.

"There were two talks there that I've always remembered," said Peter Brink, National Trust vice president for programs. "One was by historian David McCullough, who said, 'Our picture of the past is no longer just a spotlight focused on a few people. The lights on the stage are coming up and those people that have been on the stage all the time are in the light.' The other talk was by Henry Cisneros. 'He described our nation as two Americas,' Brink said. 'One of well-educated, well-off persons at ease with the quickly changing technologies of the future...the other an America of inadequate education...made up largely of older Americans and minorities. The conference culminated with an open-mike session, and we realized that about 97% of us were white. We pledged in that closing session that the next National Preservation Conference would be different. Not much later we realized that just invitations were not enough, we needed to provide some scholarship assistance if we were serious.'"

The Getty Grant Program kick-started the scholarship with \$30,000, and over the years, continued support from Getty, the Sara Lee Foundation and the National Park Service has kept the program funded well enough to transform the face of subsequent conferences.

Originally the Cultural Diversity Scholarship, the program is now called the Emerging Preservation Leaders Scholarship, a move away from what some past winners had seen as patronizing. It better fits these preservationists, who, in some cases, emerge in the field just by attending the conference.

"The (1995) conference in Fort Worth is when I realized that I was a preservationist," said Kevin Cottrell of Buffalo, N.Y. "Although I do it

*Recipient of the Emerging Preservation Leaders Scholarship, Connie Hart Yellowman, discusses restoration plans for Fort Reno in El Reno, Oklahoma, with local architect Darren Miller. In the background is the Field Officers' House.*



every day, and have been doing it for 10 years, after I went there and saw people who looked like me, I came back and it just sort of launched me.” Cottrell is the founder of the Michigan Street Preservation Corporation, a group that preserves Underground Railroad historical sites. Since catching “the bug” in Fort Worth, his work has led to a state law that requires the history of the Underground Railroad be taught in every New York school system, the first such law in the country.

#### *Lifting Voices*

High school teacher Floyd Butler is a former Chicago Bears running back and a former Emerging Preservation Leader. He works with students in Chicago to restore buildings, while teaching them about the history and the communities the buildings represent. Butler was inspired after vandals destroyed an old limestone mansion that he was painstakingly restoring. “My students didn’t understand why a black man would want to waste time and money restoring one of those broken down buildings,” he said.

Minorities in preservation often feel alone in their work, and they run into similar ignorance, apathy and inertia, whether they live out on the spacious prairie, in cozy New England, or on the hard streets of the inner city. Attending the conference is a chance to have their voices heard, and to hear others. “Nobody knows there are black people in New Hampshire,” Valerie Cunningham

of Portsmouth said. “When I tell them there’s 350 years of history here, their mouths fall open.”

Nebraska’s Nancy Haney went to the Santa Fe conference in 1997. She considers herself a minority in the sense that only two percent of Americans live in rural areas. “The rural population needs to be considered in the preservation movement,” she said. “You see the same problems here as in the cities. Money is being invested in new construction, and we’re facing that same kind of encroachment all the time.”

An archivist with Winston-Salem (North Carolina) State University, Carter Cue attended the 1998 conference in Savannah, and, while he was easily able to recall specific sessions which he thought were beneficial he, half-joking, described what would be his ideal conference. “Everyone who attended would find solutions to their own problems, without moderators, without panels,” Cue said. “Instead, we have a series of picnics, and we all get together and we shoot the breeze.”

“There’s an exposure that you get just walking around the conference,” said Connie Hart Yellowman. The director of the Fort Reno Visitor Center in El Reno, Oklahoma, she first attended the conference in 1996. “It’s what helped to give me a comprehension of my work. I had done a lot of law-related things with cultural preservation issues, but after going to the conference I started to expand my focus to include structural preservation.”

Another common problem past recipients run into is common to all preservationists: funding. Yellowman has developed restoration plans for three buildings at Fort Reno. Established as a military post in 1874, over the years the fort headquartered Indians, white settlers, and the black Buffalo Soldiers. “There has been a move to bring tourists to this location, and to develop an interpretation of the place,” Yellowman said. “We know that we have to have some kind of revenue generating activity within the buildings, since for us to restore all of the buildings it’s going to cost maybe \$12 million.” It’s easy to see how meeting at the conference can be so supportive. For instance, Cottrell is a few steps ahead of Yellowman in setting up a visitor-friendly historic district in Buffalo. “The byproduct today of what we do as historians is tourism,” Cottrell said. “People want to see what it is that we do. So, as a not-for-profit, you have to market yourself. Work with the visitors’ bureau, get in the trade shows, do the bus tours, do the whole bit, don’t wait for governmental subsidies.”

### *The Conference Itself*

The conference can be overwhelming for a first-time attendee. "You feel like a kindergartner in a group of high school seniors," Yellowman said. "But at the same time, it's not like you feel inferior to other people." To insure this, all Emerging Preservation Leaders first meet at an orientation session with an inspirational speaker. Carl Westmoreland and Pittsburgh's Stanley Lowe have spoken in the past about heritage, pride and preserving communities, with a strong emotional response. Last year, W.W. Law of Savannah closed the session by leading participants in singing a spiritual.

For the first time, at the Savannah conference, Emerging Preservation Leaders were paired with a mentor from their area. Some recipients complained that they never saw theirs, and this is one aspect organizers hope to improve in 1999. Nancy Haney was so impressed by the sessions and the general structure of the conference that she came back to Nebraska and started her own, patterned after the National Trust's. About 100 people have come to each of the conferences run by Panhandle Landmarks, an organization Haney started in 1997. "When we started, local government officials weren't interested in historic preservation," Haney said. "We just didn't have enough local people informed, so we started to promote the education of the general public as well as our

educators. Now, preservation is something they listen to."

Taking a more active role in the conference and other aspects of preservation is something the National Trust would like to see out of the recipients. Black participants claimed that there wasn't much relevant to them at the Chicago conference in 1996. But the next year, in Santa Fe, Hispanic preservationists made sure to have relevant sessions on the program. If past winners want to see that future winners get as much out of the conference as they did, it seems they have to get involved: take the initiative and submit session proposals.

### *Off-Shoots*

In 1995 the Trustees' Committee on Cultural Diversity reviewed the National Trust's efforts to broaden itself and its work. It strongly endorsed the scholarship program and recommended that Trust programs work more extensively with minority neighborhoods and constituencies. The Trust then redoubled its efforts in the newly created Community Partners Program, which integrates preservation rehab standards and affordable housing in six urban neighborhoods, including Atlanta, San Antonio, and Los Angeles. It also provides sophisticated real estate services for inner city rehab projects, and gap financing from an \$8 million loan fund.

The National Trust Main Street Center has initiated major services to urban neighborhoods, commencing with a citywide Main Street program in Boston and extending to neighborhoods in Baltimore, Chicago, and San Diego. Main Street is also partnering with the Local Initiatives Support Corporation to initiate Main Street programs with six Community Development Corporations.

The Preservation Leadership Training Institute is an intensive, week-long course held by the National Trust, some call it preservation "boot camp." As a spin-off from the Emerging Preservation Leaders Program, in 1997 the PLT was able to defray for the first time some of the travel expenses for minority participants.

State and local scholarships to the national conference started for the Fort Worth conference in 1995. Local partnerships funded tuition for 125 Fort Worth neighborhood activists, business leaders, non-profit workers, and youth. The local programs have increased every year, with more than 200 Georgians getting assistance to attend the 1998 conference. Meetings before and after

*Connie Hart Yellowman shows a wagon-wheel pulley lift to architect Darren Miller, in the commissary building of Fort Reno in El Reno, Oklahoma. She plans to turn the two-story, 1886 commissary into a museum.*





the conference expand upon the discussions of that one-week in October.

#### *Grassroots*

The Emerging Preservation Leaders are a testament to the concept of “grassroots activism,” showing on the ground level how preservation simply makes sense. For instance, Nancy Haney likens the preservation movement to environmentalism: “It’s really just another recycling issue, you know? Why should these buildings end up in landfills?”

When Eugenia Woo attended the Boston conference in 1994, she was a graduate student at the University of Washington. Now she works for the city of Seattle’s department of neighborhoods, bridging the gap between the practical and the historical, specifically in two ethnic, historic neighborhoods. “Having been to several different conferences, local, statewide and national, it’s clear that preservation is still a very white-dominated field,” Woo said. “To have this (scholarship) program, to reach out to certain segments of the population, is really good. People who are working in community or economic development, a lot of times they think preservation would hinder those things, but it doesn’t. People think preservation is just to keep everything the same but that’s not necessarily true.”

If anything, thanks to the program, perceptions have changed in and about the National

Trust and its work. “When I first heard about the National Trust, I just thought it was some rich white folks who liked to save buildings,” said Valerie Cunningham, who kept an open mind and attended the Boston conference. “It was there I discovered a vocabulary for what I was doing. I know what I am. I’m a historic preservationist.” “At the Miami conference,” said Peter Brink of the National Trust. “We white attendees realized we had at least as much to gain from having the scholarship attendees with us as they did.”

This year more than 5,000 applications have been sent out for the scholarship program. The National Preservation Conference will be in Washington, DC, from October 19 to 24. The theme is “Saving America’s Treasures.”

Established in 1949, the Trust provides leadership, education, and advocacy to save America’s diverse historic places and revitalize communities. It has six regional offices, 20 museum properties, and 275,000 members across the country.

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Photos courtesy National Trust for Historic Preservation.

### *Jazz Club at Rossonian Hotel in Denver, Colorado*

**L**ocated in the Five Points neighborhood in Denver, Colorado, the Rossonian Hotel was constructed in 1912 as the Baxter Hotel. Renamed in 1929 in honor of Mr. A. W. L. Ross, who managed the building with a group of African American men, the Rossonian enjoyed the reputation as one of the most important jazz clubs between St. Louis and Los Angeles from the late 1930s to the early 1960s. It hosted jazz greats such as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Nat King Cole, and Dinah Washington at a time when they performed at white-owned Denver hotels, but were denied lodging at the same hotels. When the legal and de facto racial segregation was reduced following World War II, the need for alternative lodging provided by the Rossonian lessened.



*Today, the Rossonian building is leased to a variety of tenants. Photo by Nancy Lyons, Preservation Partnership, Denver.*